“Have you gotten used to that avatar yet?”

Asuna raised her face from the window displaying the English homework at the sudden question.

She answered while pinching the blue hair unique to undines, flowing onto her own right shoulder, between her fingertips.

“Hmm… a little longer, maybe? It’s odd, isn’t it… my face and body are exactly the same as they were in Aincrad, with nothing different aside from the color of my hair and eyes, but it feels off on occasions. Kind of like my body isn’t properly linked to my consciousness…

“Fmm…”

The one frowning in worry was a spriggan boy with his jet-black hair standing straight up. Asuna couldn’t help but to feel that he was a boy, even though the male inside was merely a year younger than herself, turning eighteen this year, due to his avatar appearing more mischievous than his looks in the real world.

The spriggan, sitting by her side on the sofa, pushed away the holo-keyboard in front of himself, then stuck his elbows onto the table and stared hard at Asuna.

“That might be a different issue from being used to it… You mention there wasn’t any problem with the AmuSphere’s input level or response, didn’t you?

“Yeah. Both were at their average values or higher.”

“I see…”

He nodded once, then stretched out his left hand and held onto Asuna’s right hand without warning.

“Eh, wh-what?”

She asked back, her heart beating hard at the ambush, but the other party kept his solemn face on and pried open Asuna’s palm. He drew his own index finger closer towards there and stopped upon faintly making contact.

The subtle ticklish sensation originating from the middle of her palm spread all the way to the back of her avatar and Asuna involuntarily let a soft “Nn…” slip. But the spriggan spoke, his gaze absorbed on the palm, without losing his contemplative expression.

“My sense of touch is currently reacting on my side, but you can sense that you’re being touched too, right?”

“Yeah… I feel it.”

Asuna nodded and the spriggan continued with his solemn expression.

“Good, then I’ll slowly move it away, so please tell me when the sensation’s gone. …How about it, still feeling it?”

The finger against the palm slid bit by bit, the sensation that turned exceedingly faint stimulating her virtual nervous system. She whispered as her avatar trembled.

“Yeah… I still, feel… it.”

“I see… then, what about this?”

“Nn… I… can feel, it…”

“Fmm… looks like the I/O signals really are functioning at a normal level…”

“Ah… I, can…”

And there, Asuna finally noticed the fact that her response could quite possibly invite a certain sort of misunderstanding.

An intense fever swept over her entire face in an instant. She rapidly yanked her right hand back, tightly grasping it. Turning to the spriggan with a blank expression on, she shouted out at full volume.

“What are you making me say! Ki… Kirito-kun, you idiot———!!”

Although her explosive straight right definitely caused no damage as they were located at an inn in the neutral city, it smoothly blew the short spriggan into the inner wall from the sofa.

21th June 2025, Saturday, 8:30 PM.

Asuna—Yuuki Asuna was tackling homework from school with Kirito—Kirigaya Kazuto in a room of an inn on the outskirts of «Yggdrasil City», a city in the VRMMO-RPG, «ALfheim Online».

The venture company, «Ymir», that succeeded management over ALO from the now-dissolved company, Recto Progress, had brought about several changes to the game, but one of them was the granting a limited connection to external networks from inside ALfheim. By launching the browser from the menu, various sites could be viewed and homework files saved on online storage could also be accessed, like on a PC or portable terminal in the real world. Even in the off-chance of players with malicious intent launching suspicious programs, they would be immediately detected by the «Cardinal System», so there wouldn’t be any harm to public security for the home of fairies either.

Her mother frowned when Asuna began using full dive machines again and repeatedly told her, “Do your homework yourself, at least”, but Asuna considered both her body in the real world and her avatar in the virtual world as «herself». The functionality to open as many windows around herself as she wanted (to be accurate, there is a maximum limit) made it more effective to study in the virtual world and there weren’t issues such as her eyes getting tired or her shoulders getting stiff either. And above all else, Asuna could

study, shoulder-to-shoulder, with Kirito who lives in Kawagoe City, Saitama Prefecture, far away from her home in Miyasaka, Setagaya City… no, this might not be the purest motive she had, however.

At any rate, they were wholeheartedly typing away on their holo-keyboards this night in their fairy forms when Kirito started an impromptu check on Asuna's sense of touch—that was what just occurred.

The spriggan roused his body while moaning and Asuna, who stood up as well from the sofa, snapped her hands to her waist and spoke.

"Look here, if you're checking the signals for my sense of touch, there are other methods, aren't there!"

"…That was the easiest way… In the first place, you're the one who reacted in a perv… weird way, Asuna…"

She fixed an even sharper glare onto Kirito, mumbling an unintelligible rebuttal.

"Perv… what? What were you going to say? I won't get mad, so how about telling me?"

"Th-That's definitely a lie! Or rather, you're already getting mad…"

"I am not! If Yui-chan hadn't gone out, I might have gotten angry for real, though!"

Asuna's words made Kirito shiver as he stiffly stood upright.

Yui, an advanced top-down AI, the pair's daughter, and also a «navigation pixie» in ALO, was absent as she accompanied some of their friends, including Klein and Lisbeth, on their hunt. The thought of their beloved daughter catching sight of the earlier scene made her face burn up again, and with Kirito immediately forming a smile and making a comment—

"Asuna, your face's bright red."

In a cheerful tone, she couldn't help but to clench her fist once more.

Crap; that thought appeared on Kirito's expression as she turned towards him and she took several steps forward when that happened.

"……Ah…"

Asuna stood still with a soft murmur.

That sensation had assailed her once again. An odd sensation where her spirit leaves her avatar for a sheer instant. One that left her at a loss on where her hands and feet were and how to move them… one that left her where she wasn't.
Likely having sensed the abnormality, Kirito approached at a speed equal to teleportation and supported Asuna's body. He looked into Asuna's eyes with his serious expression and whispered.

"Feeling okay?"

“Yea… yeah, I’m fine. I’m feeling okay already.”

Even as she answered so, Asuna leaned her weight onto Kirito’s hands and continued murmuring.

“It’s just a little… just a little sense of discomfort. It’s not that I lose complete control of the avatar and I could simply ignore it when it comes, but… no, it might really just be me, but……”

“No… it’s best to do a proper check. You haven’t felt this back in Aincrad, have you?”

“Yeah. Not even once… I think…”

Kirito gently held Asuna up and guided her to the bedroom next door as she nodded. The rented room was a suite of the highest grade, so an unobstructed view of Ygg City’s gorgeous night scenery and the vast land of ALfheim far below was visible through the window of the spacious room. However, Kirito had no eyes for that scene, laying Asuna onto thee large bed and sitting himself down by the side. Reaching out with his hand once again, he softly stroked the light blue hair as he opened his mouth.

“…Asuna, you probably don’t want to recall this, but…”

Asuna understood what Kirito left unsaid from his hesitating tone. She lightly shook her head with a faint smile.

“It’s alright. …I haven’t felt this even once when I was «Titania». So I don’t think it’s due to the change of worlds.”

“I see……”

Nodding, Kirito finally shifted his sight outside of the window then.

It was on 7th November 2024 that he cleared the death game, «Sword Art Online», and freed the six thousand, one hundred and forty-nine players who stayed alive from the Floating Castle Aincrad.

However, roughly three hundred players, including Asuna, could not return to the real world. A man named Sugou Nobuyuki who held an important post in the general electronics company, Recto, abducted the consciousness of three hundred people into a virtual research facility established within ALO with illegal human experiments as his objective.

Asuna wasn’t treated as an experimental subject, but got imprisoned within a gigantic birdcage dangling off a branch of the world tree, Yggdrasil, instead. Sugou, who went by the name, «Fairy King Oberon», in this world, gave her the name, «Titania».

Her anguish as a captive continued until Kirito rescued her on 22nd January 2025. Those two months felt as long as two years spent in Aincrad, but still, she wasn’t aware of any abnormalities in her sense of touch even once in that period.

“…I think, the first time this… this «separation sensation» thing happened was probably around a month ago…”

After she murmured in a soft voice, Kirito’s eyes flicked wide open.

“You remember the first time?”

“Yeah. Because it was during the fight with the boss monster on the first floor of New Aincrad.”

Those black eyes blinked two, three times at Asuna’s reply.

“It was then, huh. —Now that you mention it, there was that one time you fumbled your magic, don’t tell me…”

“You sure can remember.”

While breaking into a wry smile at her partner’s unusual memory, Asuna nodded.

“I felt myself slipping far away while chanting an incantation and unconsciously stopped moving my mouth. I went back to normal straight away and that only happened once during the battle, so I did think it might have just been my imagination, but… it started occurring every now and then since that time…”

“…In that case, it really isn’t a matter of getting used to your avatar. I mean, over three weeks had already passed since you first dived into ALO before the first floor boss fight, right, Asuna? If the cause is lack of experience with your avatar, it would have happened more frequently when you were getting started.”

“I guess… you’re right. But then, what exactly has been…”

She tilted her head while lying on the bed and Kirito put on a pensive face for a while before he spoke.

“Does that phenomenon not occur when you’re in any VR space aside from ALO?”

“Erm… that’s right. I don’t full dive anywhere aside from here much, but I don’t recall feeling «separated» anywhere else.”

“Then it’s not due to the differences between the Nerve Gear and AmuSphere either. Next would be… hmm… —I doubt it, but maybe the same phenomenon is happening in the real world…”

“No, it didn’t. It would be a real out-of-body experience if it did, wouldn’t it?”

After saying so herself, she became a little scared and checked through her memories again, but fortunately, nothing similar came to mind. But in that case, the cause behind the mysterious «separation phenomenon» ended up unknown. She tried gathering information from the internet, but she couldn’t find any AmuSphere users who reported that same defect and the symptoms were much too vague for relying on support from Recto or Ymir.

The phenomenon lasts for a sheer instant and it would be the end of everything if she simply ignored it, so it probably wouldn't pose very much of a hindrance in gameplay, but—after thinking over it for this long, it was rather difficult to let the issue pass by ignored.

His side profile visible to Asuna as he sat down, Kirito let out a groan again, but soon spoke up, apparently having steeled his resolution.

"I guess all that's left would be to discuss it over with Yui."

"…Yeah…"

Asuna had thought about that as well, after the fourth or fifth «separation» occurred, but she kept hesitating until today. After all, Yui would likely be extremely worried if she knew of Asuna's abnormal condition and in the case where the problem couldn't be solved even through Yui's abilities, it would probably place a huge burden on the girl's heart.

Yui was an AI prototyped to support SAO players with their mental issues. However, her various authorities were frozen upon it turning into a death game and she was left unable to do anything but monitor the negative emotions of at least several thousand players. Her core program eventually broke down from the unusual burden placed upon it and she could hardly speak by the time she met with Asuna and Kirito.

As such, Asuna made up her mind to never worry Yui and to protect her tiny heart from even the slightest harm.

However, Kirito nodded once as though he saw through that feeling, and then reached his hand out towards Asuna's head again. While stroking her hair with a gentle yet steadfast strength—there were hardly any avatars with a level of control this delicate—he spoke.

"I understand how you feel, Asuna. But… if Yui finds out how you wouldn't discuss it over with her, that would sadden her all the same, wouldn't it, Asuna?"

"But… honestly, it's not that major of an issue. I'm sure I'll probably get used to this phenomenon sooner or later and not get bothered over it anymore."

"I wonder… Asuna, you're really sensitive, after all…"

And there, Kirito left his mouth agape and continued while shaking his head in a fluster.

"Ah, no, I didn't mean that in any weird way."

"Geez, I know that much. …So?"

"So… erm, I don't think a sensitive player would be able to ignore a tiny flaw in their senses. All the more so during combat. I want Asuna to fully enjoy this world… that isn't a death game, but a normal VRMMO.

I want to remove any obstacle to achieve that, regardless of how slight it may be… this may entirely be a selfish wish of mine in the end, but…”

Turning to Kirito, who ended off in a murmur and appeared slightly depressed, Asuna stretched her right hand out.

Laying the hand on the edge of the tight black shirt’s collar, she pulled it towards her with all she had. His balance broken by that high strength parameter inherited from the days in SAO, the slender spriggan shouted out a “Wah” while falling atop Asuna’s chest as she lay down.

Holding onto him with both arms without a moment’s delay, Asuna put her strength into hugging him tight as she whispered.

“Thank you, Kirito-kun. …I’m really enjoying myself right now. I’m having a lot of fun going about the various lands in ALfheim and the many cities on the reborn Aincrad, sightseeing, shopping, and adventuring together with you, Yui-chan, and the rest. I want to continue traveling across this world with everyone from now on too, forever and ever.”

Kirito ceased his struggling in her arms as Asuna talked on at a gentle pace. Before long, she timidly placed her hands around his back.

Now that she thought about it, this might be the first time cuddling with Kirito like this ever since in SAO. She had been continuing her rehabilitation since she was freed from the birdcage of the virtual world from January to the end of April and after that, adapting to the real world after two years, including her new school, took everything out of her, so she couldn’t afford to spend time peacefully with Kirito in either world. The only reason for today was also just because no one aside from the couple happened to receive a large pile of homework, with there being more people at the usual study meetings.

However, Asuna was currently incubating a single plan… or perhaps, a promise to herself, deep in her heart.

She didn’t know how soon it would be, but when the twenty-first floor and above are unlocked on the new Aincrad, that only got to the tenth floor thus far, she would reach the twenty-second floor before anyone else and purchase that small log house built deep in the dense forest. That player home she once spent a short yet blissful time with Kirito in.

Of course, there were sparse differences between the new and old Aincrads, not only in monster locations and item spawns but also the topography, so that particular house might not exist in that particular spot. However, Asuna believed it will. She believed that log house will definitely wait for the two of them. She wasn’t sure if the «flying house» quest needed to be cleared once again before they buy it, though.

“…Perhaps…”

Maybe Asuna's quiet murmur had reached his ears, but Kirito slightly tilted his head in her arms. After whispering, "No, it's nothing", Asuna continued without voicing it out.

Perhaps this mysterious separation phenomenon had been caused by her heart seeking far too strongly for that house. Her consciousness might have left her avatar for a sheer instant, soaring to the forest on the twenty-second floor…

Kirito's voice reached Asuna's ears as she pondered about that.

"…Let's discuss it with Yui tomorrow. Even if there was some malfunction that we missed, Yui should definitely find it."

"Yeah… that's right."

Blinking, Asuna slowly released him from the embrace.

The touching cheeks parted and the pair's eyes met at point-blank range. A faint foreboding flowed through Asuna's chest, but Kirito exchanged glances with her, then brought his body up and sat down at the side of the bed once again, before he turned his head and spoke.

"Now then… what do you want to do now? Shall we meet up with Klein and the rest?"

Asuna gave a bitter smile, then shook her head sideways.

"No way. We haven't gotten anywhere near finishing our homework, have we?"

"Ah… th-that's right…"

"It would probably be nearly ten when we finish up everything, so we'll go hunting tomorrow. Agil-san and Leafa-chan said they will be coming too, I'm sure it'll be more fun with more of us around."

"Alriiiight."

After replying in a childish manner, his head slumped over and he muttered to himself.

"Ah-ah… and ten o'clock was when the real hunting starts back in SAO too…"

"Don't reminisce about such weird things! In the first place, you weren't much for the «night shift», were you? And you still kept on levelling up despite that, so that got treated as part of the clearing group's seven mysteries."

Asuna said so, lifting her upper body off the bed, and Kirito voiced out a question while assuming a somewhat complicated expression.

"…What are the other six mysteries on that?"

"Let's see… there's the «Legend of the Black Swordsman, One-handed Sword With No Shield»… or the «Legend of the Black Swordsman, Getting Too Many Last Attacks»…"

“Wa-Wait, wait. Aren’t those all stories about me?”

“It’s fine, the seventh was the «Legend of the KoB Leader, Way Too Thick». …But that particular one turned out to be not so mysterious, though…”

Asuna recollected the memories from eight months ago as she mumbled and the black-haired swordsman who saw through the «mystery» behind the leader—Heathcliff, also known as Kayaba Akihiko, plopped his outstretched hand onto her head.

“It’s not like there were any actual mysteries around me either. I only managed to maintain my level somehow, thanks to the encouragement and help from various people… of course, that includes you, Asuna.”

After rubbing her head twice or thrice, Kirito stood up from the bed and stretched in an exaggerated motion.

“Now then, let’s hurry up and get our homework done. …While we’re on that topic, I would like to request for just a little help this time as well…”

“I suppose I got no choice.”

Getting off onto the floor with a bounce in her actions, Asuna then added on with a broad grin.

“When we’re done, make sure you treat me to something at the restaurant on the first floor!”

What she first felt when she returned to the real world from the virtual world, was the weight of her physical body.
Or to rephrase that, it could also be the magnitude of actual gravity. Since she persisted in a build focused on speed as a fencer in the old SAO, her perception of her avatar’s weight became proportionally lighter. Galloping across the fields as though she was a gale, day after day, she leapt over obstacles like a foal. That agility didn’t change even in ALO, where her status data got brought over. No, she might have felt significantly lesser gravity, now with wings on her back.

Consequently, her breathing felt practically choked from the weight placed upon her entire body in that instant she opened her eyes atop the bed in her own dimly-lit room. Despite how it was the «log out» she craved so much when trapped in that death game, she simply couldn’t derive any joy from the sensation. She would likely get used to this shock someday, all the same.

After bracing herself for a whole ten seconds, Asuna gently brought her body up.

She removed the full dive machine shockingly more slim than the Nerve Gear—the AmuSphere from her head. The sensor on the ceiling detected her actions and automatically increased the indirect lighting’s brightness.

Lowering her two feet to the floor, she cautiously stood up but as expected, still suffered from a faint giddiness. It slightly resembled the mysterious «separation phenomenon» afflicting the virtual world's Asuna slightly, but compared to there, where it felt like her consciousness took off into the sky, the real world's giddiness felt as though she was pulled towards the ground. The degree of discomfort was far worse.

Lightly shaking her head and shaking off the giddiness, she then passed her feet through her slippers and walked until the southern window.

She gazed at the residential area, submerged in the heavy and humid night air, through the gap in the curtains for a while. Perhaps there was a light drizzle, as white umbrellas formed around the street lamps, vaguely bringing to mind light effects of the virtual world.

"……?"

Feeling an abrupt stimulus in a part of her memories, Asuna frowned.

A street at night. Illumination blotted by the night fog. A waterway, murmuring as it flowed through. Hugging her knees, crouched, by its side. Feeling helpless, wanting to run away, but lacking all routes of escape…

She couldn't recall when or where she saw that scene at all. She tried to get a firm grasp on the indistinct image, but it vanished as abruptly as it came.

Feeling an inexplicable desolation lingering deep in her chest, Asuna remained overlooking the night scenery of the real world for that short while.

2

Sunny, 22nd June, Sunday, 4:30 PM.

Asuna was at the top floor in the eighth floor's dungeon of the gigantic floating castle swirling about ALfheim's skies—the so-called «boss room».

There was only one thing to be done in this room. Naturally, to fight the boss monster.

Kyurururu! That shrill warning came from a small dragon with light blue feather grown over its entire body, «Pina». Silica, the Caith player who owned it, called out without a moment's delay.
"Asuna-san, the minion summoning's coming!"

"Got it! Everyone, gather!"

Asuna raised the staff in her right hand and signalled to the party member, then rapidly began chanting a spell.

Ek Karra Frein Brunurr, Undsk
“Appear, holy fount, and drown ”

As she loudly recited the final syllable, she strongly thrust the staff onto the black marble floor. Faint blue light rippled outwards and much water gushed out as though to chase that, creating a water surface with a diameter close to ten meters before long.

“Thanks, Asuna!”

“Thank you very much!”

The leprechaun gripping a mace, Lisbeth, and Silica, with Pina riding atop her head, ran onto the water surface first, with the comrades also from her SAO days, the gnomish axe warrior, Agil, and the katana-using salamander, Klein, following them. Slightly lagging behind, the completely black spriggan, Kirito, and a Sylph magic swordswoman who is his little sister in the real world, Leafa, returned from the front lines together.

The seven of them made up the maximum limit of a party, but Asuna and the rest weren’t the only ones fighting in the boss room. They formed a raid with four other parties, so there should be thirty-five players in the vast, circular space, but it didn’t give off the impression of being cramped, likely due to the boss room itself receiving quite an enlargement from the Aincrad of old.

Jumping onto the water surface that had a HP recovery effect, along with poison and fire resistance, a pixie, Yui, waved her small hands at Asuna from Kirito’s shoulder as he took in sharp breath.

“Mama, you’ve gotten used to chanting spells, haven’t you!”

“A-Ahaha… thank you, Yui-chan.”

The moment Asuna replied so, a great number of fire pillars erupted around the water surface. Those immediately created swirls like tornados, stretching into a humanoid flame at their hearts, and changing into small fire elementals with a height of around one meter.

One wasn’t much of an opponent on its own, but there were many of them. There were likely over thirty of them spawning across the whole vast boss room. In addition, the elementals were only the minion mobs, with the lord of the spacious area covered with black marble—and the entire eighth floor of the floating castle, the boss monster, attacking at the same time.

The boss’s name was «Wadjet the Flaming Serpent».

From some research done after the initial battle, *Wadjet* was apparently a snake god of fire that appears in Egyptian mythology. It resembled that on the outside too, with an appearance like the hood portion of a cobra fused with a four-armed goddess. Its black-themed gigantic body enveloped in flames and approaching it without protection causes damage over time.
DoT

Asuna's party wasn't involved in dealing with the boss at the present moment, with two other parties taking on that role. They had to hurry up and take care of the minions while those forteen still retain their HP.

With the staff in her right hand still thrust atop the floor, Asuna quickly took note of the status of her surroundings.

Wadjet and the two parties were engaged in a fierce battle on the opposite side of the spacious boss room. Among the two parties, one led by a female salamander had backed off to a surface created by an undine mage like Asuna, but the other appeared to not have any players capable of using this «Purified Surface» spell. Asuna raised her left hand, turned towards them, and shouted out.

"Please lure as many of the minions as you can and come in the water over here!"

The male sylph leader waved back as though to respond in the affirmative.

Her six comrades nearby turned the fire elementals squirming their way there into cinders, one after another, even during their exchange. They may be the boss's minions, but they were still strong foes who negated half of all physical damage when fought normally, but they were severely weakened the moment they entered the magical water surface, so even this party, with its lack of mages, could take care of them without any problem.

By the time they took care of all the nearby elementals, the other party had dove into the water surface with a long train of enemies. It was rather cramped as expected, with fourteen in the circle with a diameter of ten meters, but Kirito and Klein pulled half of the additional elementals towards themselves right away, fighting while using the entire area of the water surface.

Asuna wanted to swap her staff for her rapier upon seeing those incessant metallic glints flashing around herself, but the staff needed to remain onto the ground to maintain the magical water surface. Asuna was playing as a mage, inclined towards being a healer, in ALO because she thought support classes could be interesting too, but another reason was how the party was already full of physical attack classes when she joined in belatedly.

Perhaps guessing at the itch in Asuna's heart, Leafa spoke apologetically after getting right next to her.

"Sorry, Asuna-san, for making you be the support all the time."

"No, it's fine, I'm definitely not doing it against my will. It's fun chanting spells and all."

"I know, right! Onii… Kirito-kun's still shy over chanting even now, you know. Please tell him off next time, Asuna-san."

Immediately stiffening the smile that momentarily appeared, Leafa raised her left hand.

Seah Rairra Heiraguru Ahstor,
"Heal them, holy water, and war

The chant for the evoked healing spell was grand as expected. After chanting the spell words smoothly, blue drops of water poured down around her from her left hand, healing the damage on the warriors not covered by the water surface's heal over time (HoT) effect.

All of the elementals have been defeated after continuing on for a little longer, so Asuna lifted up the staff in her right hand. The magical water surface with its blue splashes of water vanished and the numerous buff icons lined up under her HP bar reduced by one.

Shifting her vision, she could see the other party fighting on the right were also about to make a clean sweep of their surrounding elementals. Having confirmed all of the minions have been dealt with, Klein turned towards the fourteen fighting the boss and shouted.

"'lright, that's the end of the minions! We can switch anytime!"

A hefty imp that seemed to be the leader of the other side immediately shouted back.

"Understood! Please switch in on the next break!"

The boss in the form of a snake swiftly raised its head up high. The black goddess fused onto the spread head portion of the cobra swung the wide sword gripped in one of its four arms.

With that, purple lightning ran through the space around the boss, with humongous, half-transparent swords materializing once after another. The players concentrated in front of the boss broke up, with those holding onto shields or those specialized in two-handed weapons raising their respective pieces of equipment.

"Shagyuaaaa!!"

Along with its bizarre scream, the boss—Wadjet the Flaming Serpent swung down its sword. In response to that motion, the phantasmal, huge swords roared as they struck the players.

Four succeeded in defending while the remaining four were sent flying a great distance with their shields or weapons. However, the flames enveloping Wadjet faded due to its use of a major skill and without letting that chance escape, the mages in the rear let loose the spells to impede movement that they finished chanting.

Most boss monsters possess high resistance to debuffs, but their movement could still be sealed for ten seconds or so with the right timing. The instant the spider webs, silver chains, gooey fluids, and such created by the spells entangled Wadjet, the imp leader vigorously waved his hand around.

"Retreaaat!"

Uooh, the players started running as one as they yelled. The four blown away by the phantasmal swords managed to stand somehow and screamed lines such as "Don't leave me behiind!" as they joined their retreating comrades.

"Got it, it's our turn!"

Klein leapt out in front with his sword brandished and Kirito and Agil immediately chased after him.

A thought suddenly came to Asuna while they ran together.

—Everyone really are enjoying themselves.

That included Kirito, Lisbeth, and the rest, but she felt it all the more strongly when she saw the other four parties.

She had met the majority of those twenty-eight players for the first time today. Invited by them who were recruiting for participants in a boss clearing raid at the gate plaza in the eighth floor's main city, «Friben», they went to the dungeon after exchanging brief self-introductions and jumped into the boss room with the same vigor they used in dashing up the tower. Such a charge would have been utterly unthinkable back in the days of the old Aincrad.

In the past, before the battle to clear the boss, there were scouts and meetings, sent and had time after time, evaluating all risks, and gathering as much combat ability as possible, only after which they challenged it for real. Asuna understood the circumstances for ALO were completely different from SAO, where they had that absolute condition of not getting even a single causality, but still, she couldn't help but to think "Are we really starting like this?" right before the boss battle today. New Aincrad's eighth floor was the current front line, which meant its boss, Wadjet the Flaming Serpent, had never been defeated yet. Wouldn't it be only appropriate to have a little strategy meeting or to confirm their positions if they were taking on such a mighty opponent, she wondered.

However, she finally felt like she understands now, after nearly thirty minutes had passed since the battle started.

What truly mattered was not the deed of defeating the boss but enjoying the process of doing so.

Even if the boss were to be defeated, that did not happen due to the one-sided command of an overbearing leading group—like the «Knights of the Blood» once led by Asuna as its sub-leader. All of the players' hearts beat as one, thinking together, fighting together, cheering… or perhaps, grieving together. That was the true charm of an online RPG; it would be fun even if it ended in defeat, if she had a taste of that excitement.

The male imp player at the tail of the two retreating parties brought his left hand up as she passed by Asuna and shouted.

"We'll fix ourselves up in three minutes, take care of it until then!"

While spiritedly slapping his palm, Asuna replied.

"We got this! We'll be counting on you for the minions!"

After the group left with their armor creaking, she heard lines like “Why are you getting all friendly!” and “It’s not like that, idiot!”, and Lisbeth who ran at her side burst out into laughter.

“Same as always, huh, Asuna.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“It was the same back in the last Aincrad, every now and then when we walked together…”

“So-Something like that doesn’t matter right now! Look, the boss’s attack is coming!”

Immediately after her somewhat flustered response, Wadjet began moving once more after breaking through the debuffs.

When compared to the evil god class of monsters swaging about the vast land of ice under ALfheim, Jotunheimr, the boss monsters of the renewed Aincrad were smaller in terms of size but possessing much more power than them, apparently. That was proven by the fact that merely seven floors had been cleared out of the ten floors implemented in the floating castle, even after over an month had passed. She heard that the eighth floor’s boss, Wadjet, too, had been making strong warriors from all races in full raids, seven parties of seven players, flee without exception since a week ago.

With that in mind, an intense feeling of tension assailed her simply by looking up at the boss monster with the face of a human and the body of a snake that nearly reached the ceiling with its raised head, but she forced a smile and shook it off. What mattered wasn’t to win, but to enjoy herself. She shouldn’t be afraid of fleeing and fight with all she had—

“Jyarua!!”

Letting loose its bizarre voice, Wadjet brandished the crosier held in its lower-left arm.

In response to that motion, the circular pillars standing in a row on the outer part of the hall rumbled as they spun, revealing large mirrors hidden on their opposite sides. The two parties that had just retreated earlier instantly split up without waiting for their leaders’ command, clinging to the mirrors totaling eight.

Wadjet’s crosier shot out a ray of light that possessed enough might capable of instantly killing from the crystal ball at its end. That made it a terrifying weapon in its own right, but what made it more of a nuisance was how the light ray would be reflected in complex patterns off the surrounding mirrors, making it impossible to predict its trajectory.

It seemed those mirrors caused total annihilation whenever they appeared at the boss clearing had just begun. They apparently could be broken after hitting them countless times with weapons, but their durability were excessively high and the light ray would be shot before all eight were dealt with, causing several causalities.

However, now, a week after, a method to cope with them more efficiently than breaking them had been devised.

The players sticking to the eight mirrors forcibly changed the mirrors' angles from the front and immediately fell back. Immediately after, a dusky green light ray surged out from Wadjet's raised crosier.

The light ray that hit the mirror on the west side of the room originally should have bounced off towards another mirror at once, instantly killing the players in its path. However, the mirror that had its angle adjusted by players reflected the light ray near perpendicularly—which meant to say, towards Wadjet. Struck by the light it personally shot, the boss monster shrieked shrilly and squirmed, reducing much its even bars of HP. That said, they were only on the second with half of it decreased, but the number of deceased still numbered zero. They could have been thought as fighting relatively well for an impromptu squad lacking two parties to form a full raid.

It appeared Klein, serving as the party leader this time, thought so too, as he energetically shouted while he brandish his katana.

"'lright man, we can do this! Everyone, charge!!"

Agil, wielding a two-handed axe, and Kirito, holding a one-handed sword, leapt out right away with Leafa and Lisbeth following behind. Crowding around the boss's length torso, they all slashed, bashed, and stabbed as one.

Asuna didn't wait in the rear either this time. That said, she didn't exactly hit it with her staff but with magical attacks. Composing a spell with her skillful high speed chanting, she waved her staff at Wadjet's upper body and countless sharp spears of ice poured down, stabbing into its black scales. Its flame aura had dissipated for the moment due to the self-inflicted damage from the instant-kill light ray, so ice-elemental magic that it was weak against pierced right through it, noticeably shaving off its HP gauge alongside the physical attacks from Kirito and the rest.

Squirming with a severe wound, Wadjet began to coil its long snake body round and round like a spring. Having noticed that movement from a distance away, Asuna loudly shouted.

"The tail attack's coming! Everyone, prepare to jump!"

The attackers grappling with the boss strongly jumped back in that instant and braced themselves. If it were to be classified, Wadjet would gravitate towards being an elemental attack type of boss, but its physical attacks were mighty as well, with the failure to dodge the first hit of a skill, where it coils its tail three times a hair's breadth from the ground, resulting in the person falling down and taking in the second and third hit too.

Asuna also lightly bent her knees and estimated the timing at the same time as her comrades. Finished winding up its tail, the goddess's eyes gleamed a deep crimson. Now… jump!

However, it happened in that instant.

Slightly before her avatar jumped, Asuna felt her consciousness pulled upwards by itself. The usual «separation phenomenon».

At a time like this—! She gulped while awaiting the recovery of her senses. Despite how the phenomenon was supposed to last for a sheer instant, it felt agonizingly long in such a situation. The power accumulated within the boss's humongous body was unleashed, its tail roaring as it drew closer. It's hopeless… there's not enough time.

A conversation she had before the boss fight replayed in her mind on the verge of her two legs getting mowed down by the thick whip.

An hour earlier than the appointment with Leafa, Klein, and the rest, Kirito and Asuna logged into the same inn as yesterday and called Yui over for consultation on those circumstances.
Returned to her original white one piece appearance from the small navigation pixie, Yui listened intently to Asuna's words from between the pair, but murmured a single phrase after the explanation.

"Your consciousness… gets separated…"

Asuna nodded at Yui, demurely sitting on the sofa with her two eyes opened wide.

"That's right. It's difficult expressing it in words, but… I believe there is definitely some sort of problem in the connection with my avatar."

"How could such a malfunction happen… I apologize, Mama, if only I noticed earlier…"

"No, it's not your fault, Yui-chan."

She wrapped the crestfallen girl's cheeks between her two hands.

"I'm the one who should be sorry for not discussing it over with you earlier. I thought it could have been due to not being used to the avatar at the start. But the possibility of many other causes came up while talking with Kirito yesterday…"

There, Kirito opened his mouth while sitting on Yui's other side.

"How is it, Yui… did you hit upon any possible causes…?"

"Let's see…"

The AI girl knitted her long eyebrows between Asuna's hands and appeared to be pondering. She lifted her face after a mere three seconds or so, but her expression remained overcast.

“I am unfortunately unable to single out a cause for the malfunction solely through the information you gave earlier, Mama… Also, I am unable to directly check the packets exchanged between your AmuSphere and the ALO server with my current rights. I might be able to gain some sort of data if I am nearby when the phenomenon occurs, however…”

“I see… that’s understandable. I’m sorry, Yui-chan, for asking so much from you…”

Yui tightly gripped Asuna’s two hands, when she tried to apologize, from the outside with her own. Taking them off her cheeks, she brought them in between, and put strength into it.

“But I am still able to offer a guess to a certain extent.”

“Eh… really?”

“Yes. Firstly, we can assume the cause of the separation phenomenon does not lie with your AmuSphere or you yourself, Mama. In that case, my first thought would be a malfunction on the server’s side, but the Cardinal System hadn’t detected any errors for the time being and not a single user had reported a malfunction of the same kind.”

Asuna stared hard at the girl, who began talking lucidly while holding onto her two hands, with mute, strong emotions.

Yesterday, Kirito and Asuna worried whether this discussion would place a large burden on Yui. However, it seemed that anxiety was misplaced. Not only did Yui immediately admit she couldn’t solve the problem, but she even tried her best to handle it. The girl, too, was maturing day by day.

“Hence, I conclude the problem in question is on ALO’s server… in other words, something existing within ALfheim is causing irregular interference towards Mama. I am still unable to judge whether that is a player or an object, intentional or not, at the present moment, though.”

“Irregular… interference…”

Asuna repeated Yui’s words this time.

Even if it was a player that induced Asuna’s separation phenomenon, that couldn’t possibly be an ordinary player. No such magic or item was capable of that, so it definitely had to be one with a higher authority… it would be the act of a cracker, or maybe a game master.

What came into Asuna’s mind upon getting to that point in her thoughts was the fact of a particular man. The one who confined Asuna within a birdcage for over two months, Fairy King Oberon—Sugou Nobuyuki.

However, that man was still in custody at Tokyo Detention House and couldn’t possibly be interfering with the ALO server or anything of that sort. Kirito likely thought the same, as his face hardened for a moment but immediately lightly shook his head. Looking into Yui’s eyes with his usual expression, he asked.

“Hey, Yui. You mentioned it might have been an object that had been interfering with Asuna, didn’t you? What’s that… supposed to mean, exactly? Could something like a particular item or land formation actually surpass the system boundaries and exert an influence on players…?”

With that, the young girl slightly tilted her head, as though wondering about how to explain it, then began talking at a slow pace.

“Papa and Mama, you may already be aware of this, but I was originally developed as a prototype version of the «Mental Health Counselling Program» that takes care of SAO players’ mental states. In other words, that meant the Nerve Gear had the ability to read not only the sensation and motion signals of the ones wearing it but also their emotions. The Cardinal System in the old SAO monitored all of the players’ mental states and compiled that data…”

Asuna had already known of everything up until that point. When they first met, Yui spoke as if she was an infant of only two or three years old because the inability to treat the enormous amount of negative emotions from players damaged her core program.

After looking at each of their faces in turn, Yui continued in a firm voice.

“However, the parsing of signals representing emotions was delayed compared to those of sensation or motion. Only the hefty amount of accumulated data of negative emotions such as «anger», «sorrow», «fear», and «despair» could be distinguished from the rest, denying Cardinal… and also its subprogram, me, from parsing those other emotions at that time. Then, whenever there was input of a unique yet intense emotional pattern, Cardinal would save its raw data along with the surrounding environment. Among the data recorded was the player ID that transmitted the signals, naturally enough, and beyond that were the time, location, and even possessed items.”

“……!”

Asuna drew a short breath of air while she exchanged glances with Kirito.

This was her first time hearing of this. Yui’s explanation was somewhat difficult to understand, but the gist was as followed. During times when players strongly possessed peculiar emotions, the Cardinal System that managed the old SAO server recorded not the compressed data from parsing the pattern but the raw data… that is to say, the «emotion itself». However, wouldn’t that be an act equivalent to copying a player’s soul—even if it was merely a thin layer of it—in a certain sense?

The moment she wondered if such a thing was possible with current fulldive technology, Asuna recalled. That she might have caught sight of an actual example of that phenomenon alongside Kirito.

“…That’s right… Kirito-kun, do you remember…? Long ago, when we investigated the murder case in the area…”

Perhaps having thought of the exact, same thing, Kirito immediately nodded at that.

“Aah. We definitely saw that on top of the hill in the nineteenth floor’s field after the case was solved. The murdered Griselda-san standing right beside the grave. That… wasn’t an illusion, it was Griselda-san’s heart, saved and linked to the grave… no, the ring always buried under the grave… was that it…?”

They had no means of verifying it after all this time. Yui didn’t make a single comment regarding that matter either. Kirito eventually brushed Yui’s tiny back gently with his left hand as she remained silent. In a calm voice, he asked again.

“What you’re telling us, Yui, is that whenever players display strong emotions in the old SAO, that data would be saved, attached together with the landscape and items… is that how it is?”

Kirito asked the petite, nodding fairy once more.

“In that case, what you said earlier about an object causing the separation phenomenon was referring to that, Yui? To put it another way… a player’s heart, lodged in some item, is interfering with Asuna or something like that…?

Yui didn’t reply immediately either this time. However, rather than a silence for picking the proper words, Asuna felt like it was caused by her getting stumped at the reasoning she voiced out herself.

“…I cannot answer with a *yes* at the current stage…”
After muttering so in a reserved voice, Yui lifted her face and spoke in a distinct tone.

“But I learnt this after talking and exploring with many people, like Lisbeth-san, Silica-san, Leafa-san, Klein-san, Agil-san, everyone else, and of course, you too, Papa and Mama. That the human heart and the fulldive system hold far more potential than what I can currently understand. Hence, I cannot say*no* to your question either, Papa. As I’ve mentioned at the start, I believe that such a conjecture is plausible.”

Some unknown player.
Alternatively, a player’s «heart fragment» lodged in an item or perhaps a terrain object. Either of those was the cause of the mysterious separation phenomenon—

It was nothing more than a guess, but that’s what Yui said before the boss fight. The time to meet up came then, so they couldn’t go further in-depth, but Asuna made her own interpretation of Yui’s words while on the move to New Aincrad.

In other words, couldn’t that be someone calling for her? Someone playing ALO in the present… or perhaps someone who once played SAO was calling for Asuna. Due to that, her soul would be tugged towards that person, practically pulled out from her avatar, so to speak. If that was the truth, she was sure that the person didn’t have any specific malicious intent, be it male or female. That person just couldn’t choose the time or place, hence interfering with Asuna’s gameplay. Like at this very moment.

As the delusory floating sensation came upon her, the scenery surrounding her changed with it.

The black marble boss room gradually faded and a completely different room was vaguely projected before her.

A wall formed from a random arrangement of pale-brown blocks and a floor of the same color. The surroundings were buried in a huge amount of monsters… mineral elementals, blackened rock carved into the shape of a human, and dark dwarves, short and stout with a weapon that appeared to be a pickaxe in hand. Despite how she could certainly felt she had seen this spectacle that shimmered like a heat haze somewhere before, she couldn't recall the time or place. It was exactly the same as that queer sensation that descended upon her last night as she looked at the night scenery outside the window.

In other words, this memory did not belong to Asuna but whoever was calling for her…?

She saw the phantasmal room and monsters for a brief instant. As they vanished, her consciousness returned to her avatar as well. Her two eyes that opened with a start caught sight of Wadjet the Flaming Serpent's tenacious tail flying towards her in the same manner as a grass sickle, almost touching the floor.

Her comrades within the attack's range jumped vertically all at once. However, Asuna was the only one to kick off the floor at a slightly—yet fatally slow timing. It's over, I won't make it……

"Asunaa!"

Along with that abrupt shout, an impact came from not from her front but her flank. Her body was rapidly carried up and Wadjet's tail grazed the tip of her boots immediately after. Forgetting to even check her own HP gauge, Asuna looked into the face of the black-clothed spriggan embracing her firmly.

"Ki-Kirito-kun, why…"

Why did you know the timing for the «separation»; Kirito quickly whispered in reply to the single word with that implication.

"Yui detected it right before."

Continuing on, the pixie sitting on Kirito's shoulder remarked in a serious face.

"Eight seconds ago, some sort of signal was targeted at Mama. The analysis took a little time."

"…So, there really is, someone who's…"

Murmuring in a daze, Asuna finally noticed she had been suspended in the air for several seconds. Upon a closer look, she could see dim phosphorescence emitting from the gray wings extruding from Kirito's back.

The nine races of fairies in ALfheim are all furnished with the ability of flight without exception, even the gnomes and leprechauns who seem mismatched with the skies. The flight time restriction that existed during the Recto Progress era, too, was abolished in the May update, so now, one could fly for hours on

straight if one desired to, but exceptions do exist. The icy underground world, Jotunheimr, and the dungeons of various lands. Of course, the dungeon towers of the renewed Aincrad were also included in the list of areas that restricted flight.

However, there was yet another exception for this. Only the spriggans who excelled at treasure hunting possessed an unique advanced skill to temporarily fly, even when underground. It depended on the proficiency level, but the duration was short and Kirito made use of this hidden hand, used only in times like this, to save Asuna.

"…Thanks, Kirito-kun…"

I'm sorry; the words Asuna tried to continue with were intercepted with a shake of his head from Kirito.

Close to twenty players continuously jumped in coordination to dodge the second and third tail attacks on the ground. As Wadjet's area physical attack ended, Kirito descended to the ground while embracing Asuna. The skill's duration expired and his grey wings vanished without a sound. If she wasn't wrong, this ability should have a cooldown time stretching over five or six hundred seconds, so it would be a while until he could fly again. She wouldn't receive any help if the separation phenomenon struck once more before then.

Perhaps guessing at Asuna's inner thoughts, Yui flew from Kirito's left shoulder to Asuna's right shoulder with a bounce. Putting her mouth near Asuna's ear, she whispered.

"Mama, I saved the rough pattern for the signal, so I'll be able to warn you quicker next time."

"Okay, please do, Yui-chan."

After replying in a small voice, Asuna turned to her comrades and shouted.

"Sorry, I stumbled for a bit! I'll make sure to evade it next time!"

Lisbeth raised her left hand with a "Don't worry!" without hesitation. During which Kirito left Asuna's side and ran towards Wadjet who was in a delayed state.

Looking at Kirito's back as he mutely swung his sword together with Klein who was shouting "Uoryaa!", Asuna suddenly frowned.

Somehow, she felt Kirito kept more quiet throughout this boss battle than usual. No, he might have already started speaking less around the time he entrusted Klein the position of the party leader. She thought of confirming it with Yui on her right shoulder, but immediately closed her the mouth she just opened. She had to focus on the battle right now.

Wadjet's seven-staged HP gauge was thrust into the red zone on its second with the simultaneous attacks from the attackers who evaded the tail attack without harm. The goddess with the body of a snake let out an angry scream as it swung up the bronze torch held in its lower-right arm.

“Minion summoning, incoming!!”

Asuna had already retreated a little and begun chanting the «Purified Surface» spell slightly before Klein shouted that. The two parties who backed off to the rear would not be capable of dealing with the fire elementals spawning over the entire vast space on their own. Asuna’s party should leave the boss to the salamander-led and sylph-led parties while they deal with the minions.

Klein probably made that judgement as well. He thought to give a sign to Asuna and turned around, then noticed she was already chanting a spell and grinned.

“Alright, let’s get back and deal with the fire-eles… wait, hey, Kiritard!”

Upon shifting her vision at Klein’s flustered voice, she saw Kirito mixing in with the other two parties and charging a distance away. Perhaps having noticed Klein’s voice after running a few steps, he came to a standstill.

Asuna continued her chanting while staring fixedly at Kirito’s face as he returned with his left hand raised as if to say sorry. The usual him would never make such a mistake in the midst of a boss fight.

Did his concentration get shaved away due to worrying too much over Asuna’s phenomenon? Or—was there some other cause…?

Pondering on that in a corner of her head even while she finished chanting the spell at a high speed, Asuna thrust the staff in her right hand onto the ground with a shrill noise. Feeling the chill from the sacred water gushing up through her boots, she couldn’t help but to whisper to Yui on her right shoulder. One way or another, she couldn’t do anything while maintaining this magic.

“Hey, Yui-chan, Kirito-kun’s been…”

With that, the pixie nodded as though she had been waiting for those words the whole time.

“Yes, Papa is a little different from always.”

“He is, isn’t he… I wonder what’s wrong…”

“I don’t know either…”

Yui, who amassed much more information on the human known as Kirito than Asuna in a certain sense, was the one saying it, so he was truly acting «different from always» today. It certainly seemed unthinkable that the reason for that was unrelated to Asuna’s separation phenomenon.

—When this battle ends, I’ll have a proper talk with Kirito-kun again. About everything, including those mysterious scenes I saw last night and earlier.

Deciding so in her heart, Asuna firmly gripped her staff and focused her consciousness on the battle in her vision.

Approximately thirty minutes later—
Apparently having endured until the very end by the two of themselves, Kirito and Klein were transferred to the save point on the first floor of the dungeon. The instant their avatars materialized, the katana user clenched both fists and yelled.

“Kuwaaah— we were so close——! And there was just one of those gauges left all by itself too—!”

With that, Agil, who «returned from death» at the same time as Asuna and the rest, retorted with a bitter smile.

“That single gauge’s the tough part, though. I heard that Wadjet’s attack patterns changes when on its last gauge just like the bosses below.”

“I know, I know, but don’t ‘cha think we could have done something through spirit alone if we got to that last one?”

“No way you could! Or rather, you really didn’t when you actually got there!”

Lisbeth and Leafa weren’t the only ones who burst into laughter at the dialogue that resembled a comedy skit, the four parties that formed up the raid did too.

The «separation phenomenon» hadn’t occurred since then and Asuna spent all she had into the fight, but the challenge to clear the eighth floor boss ended in total annihilation. However, everyone had cheery faces on. The one who recruited for the raid, the Sylph leader, approached as his steel greaves rang out and called out to Klein with a smile still on his face.

“No, I honestly do think we were pretty close to something, you know. Don’t you think we could have beaten it with a full raid?”

“Ooh, I know, right! Our cooperation was something else too, if only the spawn rate for those fire-eles didn’t get jacked up weirdly back there…”

“Well, we would have been annihilated by the laser before that if you guys weren’t here. Seriously, you guys move great.”

Klein laughed with a “Hehe” while gripping the sylph’s extended right hand with passion.

After releasing his hand, the raid leader put on a slightly pensive face before turning his sight towards Agil, Lisbeth, and the rest as he spoke.

“Hey, if you’re fine with it, wouldn’t you re-challenge it with us after a trip back to the city? We might be able to find another two parties at this time.”

“Oh, of ‘cos we don’t mind! What about you, mister?”

The target of Klein's question, Agil, answered in English with a "*Why not*" and the four members of the girl squad expressed their assent when the pair turned towards them.
The katana user clad in red samurai armor grinned and started to cry out "Alright, then it's…" before one of his eyebrows twitched upwards under his bandana. He noticed the one who should have immediately agreed with him usually had been staying silent. Turning his eyes towards Kirito, standing a short distance away, he called out with a puzzled expression still on his face.

"Heeey, you're coming too, right, Kiritard?"

The black-clothed spriggan's face jolted up at that. As though the earlier conversation had gotten through to him, he showed a smile—though that, too, appeared somewhat stiff in Asuna's eyes—and spoke.

"Ah, aah, of course……"

But in that moment, his sight lingered at the blank air. His weakly pursed lips moved gingerly before long.

"……No… I have a little something on after this. Sorry for pouring the cold water on the plan, but I'll be taking my leave here."

"O… oh, sure, it's not like I got a problem with that, but…"

Klein thought to say something else after that, but rubbed his stubbled chin instead, as though to hold it back. He broke into a grin once again and nodded.

"Alright, leave the rest to me! I'll be sure to send a photo over when I get to the ninth floor!"

Picking up from there, Agil, too, voiced out a line that seemed somewhat familiar.

"I'll write you an essay of eight hundred words or less on my thoughts of the treasures we get from Wadjet too."

"I'll be looking forward to that."

Kirito gave a short, wry smile and curtly bowed at the sylph leader before turning his body. His eyes momentarily met with Asuna's, but left only what appeared to an apologetic blink as he began walking towards the tower's exit in the south at a quick pace.

She felt Yui, sitting on her right shoulder, stiffen up tightly. Asuna, too, raised a foot forward without thinking in that instant but halted her step. Asuna was the only mage in the party. She couldn't possibly leave…

"Asuna-san, please go after him."

Suddenly, she heard that. Asuna didn't know when, but Leafa was right behind her when she looked back in surprise, who then lifted her right hand with a slight smile and pressed on her back with a pat.

“I’ll ask for another two, so it’s alright. I’ll be counting on you for onii-chan.”

“……But…”

After she muttered so while moving her face left and right, Lisbeth, Silica, even Agil and Klein, too, nodded in turn with smiles on their faces.

Taking in a big breath and steeling her heart, Asuna deeply lowered her head. Raising her upper body, she shouted at her comrades and the raid members.

“I’m sorry! Please allow me to take my leave here as well!”

“Thanks!”, “Let’s meet again!”; “I don’t quite get what’s going on, but good luck!”; several voices flew over from the tens of people who watched over the exchange after that. She gave another bow, then strongly turned back.

Kirito’s presence was already gone from path continuing tens of meters towards the south from the safe room. However, Yui clearly reported from her shoulder.

“Papa is currently flying towards the southern edge!”

“Thanks, Yui-chan.”

Whispering in return, Asuna stowed away the staff in her right hand into a window she swiftly opened and began running with the dungeon’s exit as her goal.

3

Dusk engulfed the field without her notice.

ALfheim goes through a cycle of day and night in sixteen hours, so it wasn’t synchronized with the real world. It was past 5 PM at the moment, so the skies should still be blue in this season when the summer solstice had just passed, but even the afterglow had been extinguished in the home of fairies.

Aincrad’s eighth floor is a floor of forests. The third floor had woods as its motif as well, but compared to there, where there were more than a few grasslands and rocky surfaces, the eighth floor was abundant in its forests. After all, nothing that would be thought as ground existed there. A fathomless water covered the floor’s surface, rendering it unwalkable, and players had to use the suspended paths that acted as substitutes for that, the outrageously humongous trees (of course, far smaller than the World Tree, Yggdrasil, however) spreading their thick branches in all directions or the man-made suspension bridges also built everywhere, to get around.

In the old SAO, carelessly falling down meant searching for a tree with a ladder and going right and left through the water, but there was no longer any need to worry about that. Asuna ran out from the burnt-black, huge tree that served as the vessel for the dungeon, then ignoring the spiral staircase furnished on the tree right next to her, she strongly quivered the wings on her back.

The dungeon wasn't the only one burnt charcoal-black; the surrounding trees were too, due to the handiwork of the new floor boss, Wadjet the snake goddess of flames—or so the story went. The boss from old times was an utterly different being and thus, the trees around this area were verdant-green as well, so the map designers in the new managing company, Ymir, probably worked hard to burn them.

Ascending around fifty meters nearly straight up, she flew forth horizontally when the view widened to a certain extent. The tips of the towering, giant trees of this floor touch the ninth floor's underside, so she wouldn't get over the forest even if she ascended another fifty meters. In other words, this was one of the few floors where it was possible to touch the bottom of the next floor directly, if one worked hard at tree climbing, but of course, digging a hole through was beyond anyone's means.

Weaving past a trunk that likely had a diameter of ten meters as she flew, Asuna asked Yui who moved from her shoulder to her chest.

"Which way is Kirito-kun in?"

"He will reach the outer circumference soon. I will be unable to detect him if the gap widens a little more!"

"Got it! He really is fast, isn't he, geez!"

Drawing her two arms close to her body, she accelerated with all she had. She familiarized herself with the flight system unique to ALO right away and stopped using the auxiliary controller in two, three days as well, but she was still no match against Kirito and Leafa in flying if they got serious. Relying on the light let out from the lanterns of the suspended bridges laid from trunk to trunk, she flew while evading obstacles by a hairbreadth.

Eventually, a blue light shone in from the front. Moonlight—she'll reach the outer circumference soon. Kirito was probably outside the floating castle already. In the instant she thought that, Yui cried out again.

"Papa is ascending parallel to Aincrad's outer wall!"

"Eh…"

Asuna gently opened her eyes wide. Kirito mentioned that he "had something on after", so she figured he was heading towards Yggdrasil City at the World Tree to log out. However, now that she thought about it, the inns at the various towns of the eighth floor would suffice for an emergency log out and even if he was going to Ygg City, he could now teleport there directly from the teleport gate at the first floor, Starting City.

In other words, Kirito's objective was somewhere at ALO's… no, Aincrad's upper floors.

However, this eighth floor was Aincrad's front line in the present day, 22nd June. The ninth floor onwards had their outer circumferences completely sealed up, rendering it impossible to invade from outside. In the past, Asuna did accompany Kirito, Lisbeth, and the rest in a bid to fly to the «Ruby Palace» that should be

on the hundredth floor, but they reached the maximum flight altitude as quickly as the fiftieth floor and their sightseeing was limited to the steel wall endlessly stretching on.

Kirito should also be aware that he couldn't enter the higher floors. Where exactly did he plan to go despite that…?

While pondering over that, Asuna soared out into the limitless skies from the southern opening of the eighth floor.

The sight that welcomed her if she took a look up was that of the enormous full moon lying in the middle of the sky. Illuminating the outer wall of the sealed floating castle bluish-white. A tiny silhouette ascended at the edge of that wall. As though it was trying to approach the fiftieth floor area as fast as it could. Feeling a sort of tension from that straight flight, Asuna hesitated for a moment on whether she really should chase after it.

"Kirito-kun…"

Her undeliberately calling out to him coincided with Yui murmuring "Papa…", with her face popped out from the collar of her short robes. Asuna steeled her heart the instant she heard that fragile voice. Bending her two legs, she kicked the air with all her strength. Stretching her body straight, she sped upwards as a blue arrow.

The distance from Kirito was equivalent to seven of Aincrad's floors—in other words, seven hundred meters. In the old SAO, seven floors above was practically a different world altogether, but that, too, was in the past. Asuna now possessed these four wings, gleaming light-blue.

While flying desperately after her beloved one, Asuna felt a premonition. She didn't know where Kirito was headed towards yet, but she was confident there lay the answer needed to solve the mystery of the «separation phenomenon». He probably hit upon some hypothesis that used the conversation with Yui as its impetus and was now trying to prove that.

Tearing through the virtual atmosphere as he flew in the skies far above, Kirito made no attempt to slacken his speed even after passing the twentieth floor. He didn't stop even where the couple's «forest home» supposedly waited, the twenty-second floor; he passed through where the gigantic guild, «Aincrad Liberation Force», was devastated, the twenty-five floor. Where exactly is he heading… the moment right after she thought that, the black shadow decided to loop around in a steep turn. His entire body plunged towards the towering steel outer wall at his immediate side.

"Ah…!"

A stuttered cry escaped from her, expecting a collision, but Kirito spread out his wings right before the wall and sharply decelerated. He didn't slam into it with enough power to reduce his HP gauge, but the impact his two hands dealt to the wall reached even Asuna far below.

That place was… the twenty-seventh floor.

If she wasn't wrong, the main city was named «Ronbaru». Cragged, rocky mountains filled the whole floor, with the town and dungeon carved out from them. Ore items could be gotten in abundance, so it was a floor popular among artisan-class players back in SAO, but it hardly left much of an impression in Asuna. The metallic elemental-type boss monster put up a reasonable amount of resistance, but she recalled staying on the floor for merely a few days.

Those circumstances should be no different for Kirito who was also part of the clearing group. Why did he aim for the twenty-seventh floor despite that?

The black silhouette kept his two hands pressed onto the steel outer wall without moving before Asuna, staring with all her heart. As though he thought the wall could actually open up if he prayed hard enough.

However, naturally, that had no effect on the immortal wall. Asuna lowered her speed around the time she reached the twenty-sixth floor, arriving right behind Kirito at a speed akin to entrusting her body to the upwards momentum in the end.

She didn't call out. Yui at her chest, too, kept the silence. Flying-type monsters rarely showed up at these altitudes too, so all that existed around the trio was the moonlight incessantly raining down, the night wind blowing past, and lastly, the floating castle of steel.

Before long, Kirito's two hands left the outer wall of the twenty-seventh floor. Leisurely lowering his hands, his wings spun around with the slightest vibration.

"…Asuna. Yui."

A fleeting smile appeared as he called the pair's names. She hardly caught sight of that expression even throughout their relationship of over two years and eight months.

"Kirito-kun…"

Whispering to him, Asuna closed up the distance by merely a slight bit. However, she hesitated to go any nearer. There were much she wanted to ask, but she knew not where to begin.

Taking his sight off Asuna, floating in mid-air, Kirito scanned their surroundings and pointed down, towards the right.

"Let's talk over there."

Upon taking a look, there was something like bridge protruding out from the floating castle's outer wall. Its length was only around three meters, but it sufficed as a replacement for a bench. Nodding, Asuna moved with Kirito and slowly sat down on the steel beam.

Sitting next to her on the right, Kirito raised his right hand and gently stroked Yui's head with his fingertips as she peeked out only her face from Asuna's collar. While showing a delicate smile as though he held some sort of pain in his heart, he began talking in a calm tone.

"…Sorry, Yui. You too, Asuna… I made you worry, didn't I?"

As a substitute for a reply, Yui came out from Asuna's clothes, then curtly sat down on Kirito's right shoulder. Her round, black eyes shifted straight towards Asuna. Go on, Mama; they seemed to urge.

Replying with a nod, Asuna resolved herself and asked.

"Kirito-kun. …Was there… something here, at the twenty-seventh floor?"

Her mouth closed for a moment, but restated a latter half after a little thought.

"……Did, something happen… long ago, on the twenty-seventh floor…?"

Instantly—

Her own words formed a key that opened up a door in her memories and Asuna opened both of her eyes wide.

Something did. On this floor. Asuna had once heard that story from Kirito's lips. The specific floor number hadn't been mentioned, but it was clear enough now. This floor was definitely… the spark that caused Kirito to reject guilds and parties, continuing his fight as the clearing group's only solo player, that incident's……

"Aah… that's right."

Likely guessed at Asuna's inner thoughts from her expression, Kirito faintly acknowledged it and spoke.

"It was in the dungeon of this twenty-seventh floor where… the guild I first entered, «Black Cats of the Moonlit Night», got completely annihilated…"

Kirito had told Asuna about the tragedy of the Black Cats, that he had always held in his heart, two days before they married in front of their forest home. In other words, that was 22nd October, 2024.
They first met Yui in the forest on the twenty-second floor a sheer week after that, but even she knew at least an outline of that incident now. Kirito didn't talked about the past in length again and began a story of the present in a soft voice.

"…Today, when I learnt that strong emotions from players could be saved on the SAO server by being lodged in the landscape or items from Yui… I thought of this. That the feelings of everyone from the Black Cats might still remain in that case… that fear and despair from the instant they were killed by mineral elementals and dark dwarves in the hidden room in the twenty-seventh floor's dungeon…"

That vision that descended upon Asuna during the fight against Wadjet distinctly revived in her mind in the instant she heard those words.

That design, resembling stacked blocks of sandstone, was unmistakably from the twenty-seventh floor's dungeon of the old Aincrad. And the huge amount of elementals and dwarves that covered that cramped room. It was the exact same scene Kirito described, wasn't it?

"……Kirito-kun."

Asuna forced that feeble voice through her throat somehow. She somehow explained that explicable phenomenon to Kirito who raised his downcast face. The scene she saw during the boss fight, of the Black Cats of the Moonlit Night's annihilation with the hidden room serving as the backdrop—and that scene she saw from her own room last night after she logged out, of the night streets. The murmuring, flowing waterway and the street lights shrouded by the night fog…

"……"

It apparently also astonished Kirito as expected, making him speechless for several seconds, but he slowly nodded before long.

"…I doubt there's any mistake. Those night streets are… probably the memories from the only female player in the Black Cats… So that means… that girl was the one who caused the «separation phenomenon» in Asuna…"

He temporarily cut off his words there, continuing in a voice more hushed than before.

"—I wonder if Sachi was calling out, to me… —But why, not to me… but to Asuna…?"

The one who answered his dazed mutters, that seemed partially targeted towards himself, was Yui who remained silent watching over them thus far.

"That would be… because Papa is currently using a different avatar from your time in SAO… I think."

"……!"

Kirito's upper body jerked up in that instant and he looked down at his two hands, covered in black leather gloves. Asuna knew the shapes of those palms and fingers were just the tiniest bit different from when he was in SAO.

In order to start a normal game life in ALfheim Online, not treating it as a death game, Lisbeth, Silica, Klein, Agil, the many other survivors, and obviously, Asuna as well, transferred the avatars and account data from their SAO days to ALO with barely anything changed. However, Kirito was the only one to start anew with a spriggan that had a somewhat mischievous appearance, to rescue Asuna from that birdcage, and continued with that.

If Kirito had revived his old avatar, those feelings from that girl known as Sachi—that might have been stored somewhere on the twenty-seventh floor of New Aincrad would have probably called out to Kirito instead of Asuna. In that case, she guessed Kirito would have been the one with the «separation phenomenon».

But instead of Kirito, why did Sachi choose Asuna, no, why could Sachi choose Asuna?

The girl should have been deceased for over a year before Asuna married Kirito. In those days, Asuna pushed forward with nothing but the strengthening her guild and clearing the floors, as the sub-leader of the newly-created guild, «Knights of the Blood». She merely exchanged glances with Kirito at strategy meetings or boss clearing battles and knew nothing of him joining the «Black Cats of the Moonlit Night» or that the guild was utterly annihilated aside from him, its only survivor. To put it in reverse, Sachi of the Black Cats should also know nothing of Asuna, not even her name.

The one who answered her doubts was Yui this time as well.

“The avatar Mama is currently using is… technically speaking, still in a married state to Papa’s old avatar right now. It’s not display on your status as ALO presently do not have a marriage system, but… your character data is still connected to the old Papa.”

“Is… is that true!?”

The state of affairs should have gotten her used to it already, but the surprise still led Asuna to end up shouting.

Kirito, too, opened his eyes wide, but muttered “So that’s it…” after a little while.”

“…I was there too… when Sachi died. Sachi’s emotions on the verge of death must have been saved, linked to my old avatar, rather than that place on the twenty-seventh floor’s dungeon. But
I ended up changing my avatar… that’s why the signals sent from Sachi’s emotions headed towards Asuna who was still linked to my old self… so that’s how it is…?”
She could somehow understand up to that point. However, she still had an unsolved question.

“…But why would it be «now»…?”

Turning her sight towards the outer wall of the towering floating castle right to his left, she continued.

“The separation phenomenon first occurred over three weeks after I first dived into ALO. Besides, the frequency had been increasing lately. The blending in of memories, that never happened before, also began happening…”

“……That’s…”

Kirito voiced out a single word, then suddenly pulled out a window. He stared at the time display for a while, but took in a deep breath and mentioned in a slightly tense voice.

“…Sachi died on the twenty-second of June, 2023… today, two years ago. The time was… 5:45 PM. In another, three minutes…”

“……!!”

Asuna instinctively swallowed her breath. Yui, sitting on Kirito’s shoulder, had her black eyes wide open as well.

Removing the window and looking up at the night sky that was completely filled up with gleaming stars without anyone’s notice, Kirito began to talk softly.

“……I… had witnessed many players dying in SAO. Some who even had their lives severed by my own sword. That’s why… I planned to stop thinking of the deaths of the Black Cats and Sachi as a unique case. When I was in the last Aincrad, I treated a tree growing at the inn home to the Black Cats as a replacement for a grave and visited it every now and then, but… now I can’t access both the eleventh floor where that inn was and the twenty-seventh floor where everyone died… I thought of ending it like that… But after listening to Yui talk… I realized the cause of your separation phenomenon might be Sachi’s emotions, saved on the server, and could only think about confirming it no matter what the cost was, Asuna…”

Placing his two arms onto his lap, he firmly gripped both hands into fists. With his head deeply hung, he articulated the continuation in a stifled voice.

“……If Sachi’s emotions in that moment… her fear, despair, and sadness were saved onto the server and they’re trying to make themselves known to someone now… that would be my duty as the one and only survivor. But I changed my avatar and cut my ties to the past… it’s my fault that Sachi’s emotions lost their way and… towards Asuna……”

“……Kirito-kun.”

Asuna shook her head endlessly as she called out the name of the one precious to her. There were so much that she wanted to tell him that the words wouldn’t come out. It was when even breathing started to hurt from the overwhelming irritation.

“That’s wrong, Papa!”

The one who decisively shouted that out was Yui. Flying up from Kirito’s shoulder, she moved right before his face, then earnestly talked with her two small hands gripped tight.

“The Cardinal System records only special emotions that it cannot decipher the patterns of. It might not be nice to say it this way, but the fear and despair players possessed on deathbed in SAO are nothing special. The raw data for despair would cease to be preserved through the system’s operations merely two weeks after. So, if Sachi had left some kind of emotion on the server… that should have been neither despair nor fear!!”

Kirito lifted his face just a little at Yui's frantic cries and muttered in a hoarse voice.

"……Then…… the emotion that Sachi left behind……"

Asuna couldn't hear those words to their very end.

22nd June, 5:45:13 PM. The greatest «separation phenomenon» thus far occurred.

The hardness of the steel beam she sat upon, the coldness of the air blowing past at high altitudes, the texture of her cloth equipment suited for mages, all of that went somewhere far away. An overpowering floating sensation enveloped her entire body and the weight of her virtual body vanished.

And thus, Asuna's consciousness finally left her avatar completely. A white light painted over the gigantic form of the deep-black floating castle and the skies filled entirely by stars.

Her soul was sucked into the hallway of light, guided somewhere else…

She was standing in an unfamiliar room when she regained her awareness.
It wasn't terribly spacious. A simple bed and a wooden desk was all it had for furniture. Streets that brought to mind Europe's rural villages could be seen through the one and only window present. A lid of stone and iron stretched out in the skies' place. This wasn't the real world… it was a street somewhere in Aincrad. The roof and walls of each house seemed familiar. This was probably the main city around the eleventh or twelfth floor. A floor that shouldn't have been released yet at the present moment.

It was night, but the illumination from the single lamp on the wall made it dim. It was probably not a player home but a inn. Asuna went around the bed, approached the door, and gave the know a spin, but her hand slipped through without being able to grip it. Upon taking a look at her own body, she was no longer an undine mage, surprisingly enough. A bodice for knights based around white and red. Long gloves and long boots in the same colors. There wasn't a rapier on her waist, but this was unmistakably her garb from her days in the guild, Knights of the Blood. However, her whole body was translucent like a phantom.

What exactly is going on; it happened when she raised her face with that thought.

The space atop the bed flickered and a hazy shadow appeared.

A female player with a slender body. Turning her back to Asuna, she was sitting down on the white sheets. She worn a light-blue tunic and mini-skirt. Without any armor. The hair, neatly snipped short slightly above her shoulders, was black with a mere tinge of blue. She could tell the girl was from the same generation from that back view alone.

The girl appeared to be swaying her upper body left and right. The instant she thought that the girl was likely singing, a mellow singing voice reached her ears. A famous Christmas song. She continued singing with love, slowly, gently, phrase by phrase.

Multiple beads of light began to waver in Asuna's vision as she listened. Tears had gathered in her two eyes without her notice. The strong emotions gripped her chest. The girl's emotions flowed in with the melody as their medium. Not a single fragment of fear or despair was there. Filled with warmth, like basking in sunlight on a spring day, those feelings were nothing but pure…

A tear overflowed from Asuna right's eye and fell as the song ended.

The girl stood up and mutely spun about, then faced Asuna with the bed between them.

The light brimming in her two eyes denied her from getting a good look at her face. She somehow managed to catch sight of those lips that showed a modest smile moving gently.

She heard a voice.

Tell him for me.
That I was happy.

The pure white light enveloped Asuna once again. The girl, the room, the streets, all of it went far away. Entrusting her body to the floating sensation, Asuna understood. That this would be the final «separation».

Slowly, her eyelids lifted.
A limitless number of stars glistening in the sky faintly dyed a bluish-indigo. The steel castle that towered over all else and a large full moon visible at its edge.

She shifted her sight a little, and there Kirito and Yui were, peeking at her with worried faces. Kirito's right hand was supporting Asuna's body.

"…Thank you, I'm alright now."

Whispering, she took a glance at her attire while rousing her body, but of course, it had returned to the original blue short robes.

"Asuna……"

Approached by a concerned, questioning voice, she took another look at Kirito. She felt a little lost at where and how her explanation should start, but immediately realized. What she should be telling him was already in her heart.

"Sachi-san was smiling."

Asuna said so, and Kirito opened his two eyes wide.

Peeking straight into those black eyes, that increasingly reflected the light from the myriad of stars, little by little, Asuna delivered the words she was entrusted with, with all her heart.

She sang that Christmas song, just like Sachi.

The day after «that day»—23rd June, Monday, nine o'clock at night.

Asuna was, once again, at the main city of New Aincrad's eight floor, «Friben».

The second battle to clear the boss without Kirito and Asuna yesterday had apparently ended in failure, regrettably. However, they got a look at how to fight when it came down to the last HP gauge, so everyone who made up the raid seemed to have sworn to challenge it once again on the next day.

This time, aside from Asuna and Kirito who were obviously participating, General Eugene and Lord Sakuya also joined in, leading one party of their salamander or sylph elites respectively, covering the gathering place, the teleport gate plaza, in several times the enthusiasm of the previous day.

"But still, I'm seriously getting scared…"

That one who called out to Klein with that was the sylph swordsman serving as the leader of the entire raid once again this time. He seemed to have gotten cold feet from taking up the commander position without consulting the races' lords, but there were hardly anyone—among the men, at least—that could refuse when told "We'll be in your care" by Sakuya herself with a sidelong glance.

"What exactly are you, to get called out by both Sakuya-san and General Eugene at the same time?"

When Asuna looked on at the scene of Klein smiling with a "Nah, it's not like I'm that important, nahaha", while questioned by the sylph leader, before getting retorted with a "But you aren't the one they're interested in" by Agil, with weariness and heard Kirito's and Yui's voices from right behind her.

"E-Eeh? My hairstyle?"

"That's right!"

Turning around, she asked the pair.

"What's the matter, Kirito-kun, Yui-chan?"

"Nah, that's, well…"

The spriggan pinched a tuft of his spiky, black hair as he spoke with a troubled expression.

"Yui's been telling me to change my hairstyle because it's hard to sit on it… Changing hairstyles doesn't come cheap, you know…"

With that, Yui, standing on Kirito's shoulder, placed her two hands on her waist and objected.

"I think you should spend your money on more than equipment and the casino every once in a while! Besides, my information gathering efficiency increases when I'm somewhere high up!"

"Hold on a moment, Yui-chan. Earlier, after equipment, you mentioned…"

"I-I got it! I got it already! I'll change it right after the boss fight ends today!"

Perhaps having changed his mind rather abruptly, Kirito shouted that, but Yui shook her head once again.

“There’s ten more minutes until we assemble! You can change your hairstyle at the barbershop over there with that much time!”

“Alright, alright… —Well then, Asuna, sorry, but I’ll be off for a while, so I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Y-Yeah. Take care.”

Waving the pair off, a thought suddenly came to Asuna.

His current spriggan avatar might have a different face and hairstyle from his avatar in SAO, but he were to flatten his spiky hair, wouldn’t he give off the same presence as the old him, unexpectedly?

It wasn’t like she wanted him to return to his appearance back in SAO, but still, Asuna still felt some sort of anticipation and waved her hand at Lisbeth, Silica, and Leafa who just appeared from the teleport gate.

“Everyone, hurry, hurry!”

“What, what is it?”

While beckoning over Lisbeth and the rest, who had puzzled faces on, Asuna cried out with a smile.

“Well, you see, Kirito-kun’s going to…”

(End)